



CITY OF NEWBURGH

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Christine Bello, Councilwoman
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June 11, 2009

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY OF NEWBURGH REGARDING THE COLORED BURIAL GROUND AT THE SITE OF THE NEW COURTHOUSE

Today, the City of Newburgh has brought to completion the construction of a new municipal courthouse, a place symbolic of justice where the rule of law and principles of equality may reside. For nearly a century, this structure at Broadway and Robinson Avenue served as a school; a place dedicated to the instruction and learning of truth, and to the ideal that education is the surest path to self-sufficiency, achievement and freedom;

But this is a special place for another reason, one that cries out with a voice that must be heard. And we who now stand here today to dedicate our new hall of justice, need to listen to that cry—that voice that speaks of injustice and shouts against a kind of raw callousness which cannot be allowed to stand unanswered.

Therefore, it is a matter of the greatest significance that full and appropriate recognition be made of the use of this land, before the school was built, as a Colored Burial Ground, a place intended to provide a final, peaceful repose for individuals who composed the core of our community more than a century ago; and to recognize that these persons, as do all persons, had their own history and made significant contributions to the world in which they lived.

We, who are alive today, continue to benefit from the contributions and the sacrifices they made. It is important to us and incumbent upon us to recognize the significance of their lives, and to hallow and commemorate their resting place appropriately, as a perpetual reminder to us and to future generations of the sacredness of this space and the debt which we owe to them.

In the past, events and actions have occurred which have transgressed the sanctity of this place; including various construction projects over the years that have disturbed the mortal remains of

those interred here, and intruded upon their right to a dignified and peaceful resting place. Such actions have generated a feeling of disregard and disrespect for the individuals, and their histories.

Therefore, on behalf of any and all persons and institutions, past or present, who actively or passively transgressed by despoiling the sanctity of this sacred space, thereby further diminishing the humanity as well as the history and heritage of those buried there, we the Mayor and City officials of the City of Newburgh, express our sincere and profound regret and apology.

This in no way diminishes the pride we take in the people of the City of Newburgh today, who, from municipal officials to clergy, to our residents, to the construction workers on site, pledged to do everything possible to see that the right thing was done this time- regardless of the cost in time and money. We have come together as a community to mourn and honor these forgotten souls.

Those of us who are alive today must continue to adhere to the principle that we are obligated to cherish and preserve the memory of all our forebears, who delivered to us the world we have inherited, as trustees for future generations.

We also hereby obligate ourselves and all our citizens today, and those for generations to come, to never forget these early residents of the City of Newburgh, their lives, their stories, and their heritage, which are now ours to protect and pass on.

By such commemoration and obligation, we pray and hope that the sins of the past will not be repeated, and that our descendants will continue to remember, to honor, and hallow those interred here.

With the continued help of the community, especially the Colored Burial Ground Advisory Committee, we pledge to do all we can to see that justice prevails not only within the walls of the new Courthouse, but here on these sacred grounds; so that never again will the voices of our ancestors go unheard.

Sincerely,

Mayor Nicholas J. Valentine

Councilwoman Marge Bell

Deputy Mayor Regina Angelo

Councilwoman Christine Bello

Acting City Manager Dwight H. Douglas

Councilwoman Mary Ann Leo-Dickinson